



THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH

Edinburgh Research Explorer

Learning Journeys and Master's literacies

Citation for published version:

Zhao, W, Sangster, P & Hounsell, D 2017, Learning Journeys and Master's literacies: Chinese first-degree students' transitions to postgraduate studies in the UK. in E Kyndt, V Donche, K Trigwell & S Lindblom-Ylänne (eds), *Higher Education Transitions: Theory and Research*., 12, New Perspectives on Learning and Instruction, Routledge.

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Document Version:

Peer reviewed version

Published In:

Higher Education Transitions

Publisher Rights Statement:

This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in Higher Education Transitions: Theory and Research on 9/5/2017, available online: <https://www.routledge.com/Higher-Education-Transitions-Theory-and-Research/Kyndt-Donche-Trigwell-Lindblom-Ylänne/p/book/9781138670891>.

General rights

Copyright for the publications made accessible via the Edinburgh Research Explorer is retained by the author(s) and / or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing these publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

Take down policy

The University of Edinburgh has made every reasonable effort to ensure that Edinburgh Research Explorer content complies with UK legislation. If you believe that the public display of this file breaches copyright please contact openaccess@ed.ac.uk providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.



Learning Journeys and Master's literacies: Chinese first-degree students' transitions to postgraduate studies in the UK

Wei Zhao, Pauline Sangster and Dai Hounsell

Introduction

In education, success typically breeds opportunity. Students who have shone in one form or at one stage of formal learning find doors opening to new study possibilities in a markedly different form and, typically, at a higher level of intellectual challenge. One such group is represented by the growing waves of students who not only embark on Master's programmes, but choose to do so in another country. In the UK alone, there were 73,890 students from overseas taking full-time postgraduate taught degree programmes in 2013/14 (HESA, 2015). Of these, a total of 3810 were from mainland China, and this chapter discusses a qualitative doctoral study of the academic learning journeys of three groups of these students (Zhao, 2014). All of them had enrolled in Master's programmes in a Scottish university, having successfully completed first (Bachelor's) degrees in their homeland.

A web of transitions

For international students such as these, rising to the challenge of their learning journeys entails negotiating an intricate web of transitions, the first and most obvious of which is the identity shift from undergraduate to postgraduate (Tobbell et al., 2010). Despite little scholarly attention to the distinctive features of learning at Master's level, there is broad agreement that it is not simply an extension of undergraduate study but an intensification of intellectual challenge. Knight (1997) for example sees it as going beyond 'knowing what' to 'knowing how', and akin to the 'double-loop learning' discussed by Argyris and Schon (1978), where the concern is not just to resolve a given problem through corrective action but to venture further in engaging with the underlying variables. The UK Quality Assurance Agency has suggested that:

All master's degree graduates have in-depth and advanced knowledge and understanding of their subject and/or profession, informed by current practice, scholarship and research. This will include a critical awareness of current issues and developments in the subject and/or profession; critical skills; knowledge of professional responsibility, integrity and ethics; and the ability to reflect on their own progress as a learner.
(QAA, 2015)

For many international postgraduate students, notable challenges are seen to lie in the intensified expectations in Master's programmes for criticality and independence of thought (McEwen et al., 2005 Bache and Hayton, 2012). However, there has been vigorous debate about the extent to which Chinese students' conceptions of learning and approaches to studying can validly be understood through the lens of Western-derived concepts, especially since the relationships between memorisation and deep understanding are markedly different in Confucianist cultures (Marton, dall'Alba and Kun, 1996; Kember, 2000).

A second challenge entails cross-cultural adjustment (McClure, 2007), negotiating the transition from Chinese to British pedagogical practices. Within the former, it is argued, as in other Confucian-Heritage nations, teachers are highly revered and relied on as sources of authority and to regulate students' learning. In the latter, by contrast, students are expected to exercise progressively greater self-direction in their studies at university, and to advance their knowledge and understanding through active questioning and interaction with one another as well as with their teachers and the wider scholarly community. From a 'large-culture' perspective (Hofstede, 1986, 1997), this East/West divide risks reductive stereotyping, casting all Chinese learners as dispositionally ill-equipped to rise to the demands of postgraduate study in an Anglo-Saxon university (Grimshaw, 2007). By contrast, from a 'small-culture' perspective, Chinese students studying abroad will find themselves – like any international student – in a novel teaching-learning environment with unfamiliar expectations and requirements (Clark and Gieve, 2006). The challenge is then to adapt to a new pedagogical 'cultural script' (Welikala and Watkins, 2008).

A third transitional challenge applies to Master's students who are not simply extending their first-degree studies but are instead 'moving on' (Bowman, 2005) to a new subject area or trying to advance their career by gaining a postgraduate qualification. For these students, Mastery – here the term is unquestionably apt – of a subject or discipline, especially at postgraduate level, entails learning distinctive habits of mind which extend far beyond subject-matter to encompass subject-specific 'ways of thinking and practising' (Hounsell and Anderson, 2008), including conventions for written and verbal academic discourse that are tacit rather than directly taught.

Fourth is the challenge of studying in a language other than one's mother tongue. Ostensibly, this challenge is minimised by postgraduate admission requirements of a threshold score in a recognised English-language test; but in reality, there are still steep linguistic hills to be climbed, and 'language shock' is a common experience for international students (Brown and Holloway, 2008). Skills in academic reading, listening, speaking and writing may all be severely stretched, especially when compounded by the challenges of learning to communicate in a new subject area together with greatly increased demands upon postgraduates to engage in classroom discussion, read widely and undertake writing assignments.

Towards an integrated approach

For the purposes of the present study, these dimensions of transition should be seen not as relatively discrete elements of these students' experiences, but rather as closely interwoven strands within their larger postgraduate learning journeys. In consequence, while there is value in concepts such as language shock or identity shift, a more expansive and holistic conceptual vantage-point seems called for. Its seeds can be found, to a significant degree, in an academic literacies perspective (Lea and Street, 2006; Lillis and Scott, 2007). Drawing on sociolinguistics, it is argued that university literacy practices encompass not only reading and writing but wider forms of academic discourse, and should be seen as 'situated', varying by subject area, genre and institutional setting. Taking a broadly ethnographic approach to empirical enquiry, academic literacies research has been concerned not just with literacy

practices in themselves but with questions of identify and power to which they give rise.

The present study draws from this perspective, but adopting the wider focus of *Master's literacies* to incorporate the step-change from undergraduate to postgraduate and to encompass the full span of teaching-learning and assessment activities experienced in a UK university by the Chinese Master's students cross-cultural learning journeys.

Method

This chapter reports on a fine-grained analysis of data gathered by the first author for doctoral research in the School of Education at the University of Edinburgh. The other two authors, her academic supervisors, were closely involved at all stages of the investigation. Regular discussions took place between all three researchers throughout the study.

The key research question which guided the study was:

How do Chinese-educated graduates experience academic literacy practices in their progression from a first degree in their homeland to a Master's level Programme in a UK university?

From this overarching question three additional sub-questions were derived:

1. *With this progression, what transitions do these students experience in pursuing their Master's Programmes in the UK?*
2. *In what way do these transitions arise from and relate to differences between their literacy practices at undergraduate level in China and the Master's Literacies required of them in the UK?*
3. *How are (1) and (2) affected by features of the three specific Master's Programmes investigated?*

Research design

Full-time UK Master's programmes typically require students to take six taught courses over a period of 8-9 months, following which they focus exclusively on an independent research study leading to a dissertation, under the supervision of an academic member of staff. The present study adopted a longitudinal design, interviewing the student participants at three stages in their programmes: at the beginning (month 1); half way through (month 5); and at the end of the taught component (month 9). Because many Master's students return home to gather data for their dissertations, and often do not come back to the UK subsequently, it was decided that interviewing them at these key points increased the likelihood of maintaining contact with them throughout the academic year and across the three interviews.

Sampling

Data were gathered from Master's programmes in three contrasting subject areas on the hard/soft continuum (Biglan, 1973) in the same university: the *MSc Education*, a 'soft' subject; the *MSc Signal Processing and Communications*, a 'hard' subject; and the *MSc Finance and Investments* which has both 'soft' and 'hard' characteristics evident in the other

two. A total of 18 students (5 from *MSc Education*, 6 from *MSc Signal Processing and Communications*, and 7 from *MSc Finance and Investment*) each took part in the three phases of interviews. A total of 54 interviews were conducted. All the students had completed their first degrees in mainland China within the previous year.

Interviews

The interviews lasting around one hour were arranged for a time and in a location that was convenient for the participants, were audio recorded and then fully transcribed. An active, reflective interviewing protocol was used because, compared to traditional or standard interview protocols, this is a more open-ended approach which considers interviewers and interviewees as equal partners in constructing meaning within an interview (Roulston, 2010; Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009).

Chinese rather than English was used as the main communicative language because this helped the research participants to feel comfortable and encouraged them to talk, while also recognising that, at the time of the first phase of interviewing, most of the participants would have been relatively unused to using spoken English to express their ideas. A draft translation of the interview schedule into Chinese was also peer-checked with Chinese final-year PhD students and piloted with Chinese student volunteers from each of the targeted programmes.

Analysis of interviews

In embarking on the process of identifying patterns, themes, sub-themes, consistencies and exceptions emerging from the data, both the doctoral researcher and the two supervisors each worked independently on sub-samples of interview transcripts, before coming together to share, justify and refine initial codings. In this way initial codings could be expanded to ensure coherence and overall clarity and to remain alert to the connections between the different themes and sub-themes that were identified. While interview questions had been crafted in particular ways to foreground key themes and topics to be explored with participants, there was also a concern to remain alert to additional, and perhaps unexpected, themes that could – and indeed did – emerge from the data (Charmaz, 2014). This careful process continued as themes were identified and findings began to be interpreted within individual transcripts, across transcripts within each School, and between Schools.

Generalisability

Given that this is a small-scale qualitative study, very considerable caution was exercised in generalising from the views and experiences of the sample of students in the three Schools which comprised the study. However, the interviews have alerted us to central issues and challenges that all international Master's students coming to the UK to undertake postgraduate degrees are likely to encounter and which therefore have some generality (an issue to which we return in the closing section below)

Findings

Autonomy in learning

Master's-level study in a UK university calls for a considerable measure of autonomy to be exercised by students in their everyday learning and, in the present study, it played a crucial

role in the students' interactions with peers, within and outside of timetabled classes; in their engagement in critical and analytical thinking; and when they sought to communicate in the discourses of their chosen subjects. But there were wide-ranging differences between students, across all three programme settings, in coming to terms with this requirement. Some had recognised the need for a more transformative conception of learning (Marton and Säljö, 2005):

[Master's] teachers don't teach knowledge. ... They need to show what problems are in this area, so we could know what we're going to solve. They don't need to tell you what the truth is. They're only responsible for guiding us to find the research direction...
(*Lillian, Signal Processing and Communications*)

...Previously I thought learning was to learn everything taught by the teachers... But now at the Master's level, learning is more important than teaching... at the undergraduate, I thought learning was to know a formula and a conclusion. But at the Master's level, learning is to learn the theories underneath them... It should go wider and deeper. (*Emily, Signal Processing and Communications*)

Others were struggling to assume greater responsibility:

It'd be better if the teacher could make every bit of knowledge listed on one sheet. Then we don't need to find it by ourselves. (*Rita, Education*)

Why does he just leave a few readings? Why can't he give us a summary. We can read that... (*Cindy, Education*)

Not surprisingly, students in all three programmes drew comparisons with their previous teaching/learning experiences in China but, while some grasped that the 'cultural script' for pedagogy (Welikala and Watkins, 2008) had changed, others felt consternation:

In China, we only had tutorials before exams. We tried to make the exam questions slip from the teacher's mouth. I like to be here [in the UK]. If you have something unsure or unknown, you can ask teachers. They wouldn't tell you the answers like the Chinese teachers usually did. They just show you ways of thinking and then leave you to do research. I feel the UK way of teaching and learning helps me to learn at the Master's level. (*Emily, Signal Processing and Communications*)

I can't accept this (UK) way of teaching... In China, teachers would list and explain all the theoretical concepts...and...summarise key bulletins of knowledge according to their readings. This UK teacher's teaching is unstructured and lacking in focus (*Fiona, Finance and Investment*)

As this last comment suggests, those who more readily adapted had perceived the need to take personal responsibility for getting to grips with the course materials, while those who had not yet broken free of their earlier study routines were likely to attribute blame to others' shortcomings. For a few, there seemed to be little sense of personal agency:

To be honest, I never did this course module at undergraduate learning. It's really really difficult for me. I barely understand in the class... He [the UK teacher] always asks some questions to review the content taught in the previous class. It's helpful to other students, but not to me, because I haven't fully understood the previous class... (*Bruce, Signal Processing and Communications*)

I should read, but I don't read much. It's less useful for me. My interest's not there.

(Zack, Education)

I did this module's exam really really bad. All the exam questions [the teacher] examined, I didn't prepare... His questions can be found in the further reading that he suggested us to read, but I didn't read. So I didn't know anything. *(Fiona, Finance and Investment)*

Equally importantly, adjusting to a new learning environment was often not – as the literature on self-regulated learning might suggest (e.g. Zimmerman, 2002) – a single event in a more settled process of enhanced responsibility for learning. As their programme proceeded, some students found that expectations they had come to understand had since shifted up a further notch or two, with unsettling consequences:

[My progress] is much better than Semester 1. Firstly, I've adapted to learn in English. Secondly, I've known what I'm going to do. In the last semester, I was dispirited and disenchanted in learning. But in this Semester, I began devoting and learning harder... I take every chance to interact with teachers. *(Emily, Signal Processing and Communications)*

You must have expectations about what you'll achieve. But in the last semester, my expectations were out of control: for some assignments, I thought I did great, but I got really low scores. Contrarily, for some I didn't feel good about, I got high scores. In this new semester, it's even more out-of-control. *(Tracy, Education)*

Students who had taken greater control of their learning not only took pains to rethink their study habits where necessary but were also more resourceful in learning through interaction with peers as well as teachers:

(If I find I'm not doing well) I would share my experience with others... Then I can know... what I haven't done enough of... If my academic performance isn't good, I'll try another way (to learn). *(Roy, Finance and Investment)*

In other words, Master's learning for them was as much a social as an individual practice.

Subject discourses

Negotiating the complex demands of specific subject discourses (Street, 2004; Lea and Street, 2006) proved to be challenging for all students, particularly those who had changed their main subject between their undergraduate and postgraduate degrees. While most students, across all three Programmes, had found reading, listening and speaking difficult, academic writing proved especially problematic —not only because they were writing in their second language but also because it called for scholarly language that accorded with subject-specific conventions. The English they had learnt in China and their prior teaching experiences did not serve them well in meeting these demands.

While most reported having embarked on their Master's degree with confidence in their ability to succeed, many were soon expressing concerns about their ability to cope with subject-specific literacies:

And my previous knowledge regarding subject terminologies can't apply to Education... So I have to understand the text meaning [of subject terminologies], then do critical thinking from the philosophical perspective. It's so hard... ...Most important is how you propose your arguments ... I have some ideas, but don't know how to express them.
(Tracy, Education)

Challenges with extended writing were reported in all three programmes, even those where statistical work was prominent:

There's no problem when I'm calculating... It becomes a problem when I'm trying to write long sentences or essays. (Charles, Signals Processing and Communications)

If it's Mathematics, [the teacher] would be satisfied with your correct answers. But in this module, which is quite subjective, it's really hard to write within a professional perspective. (Andrew, Finance and Investment)

I had challenges in writing. It wasn't only in my undergraduate writing. It's also a challenge right now. We [the western and the Chinese people] have different ways of writing. (Fiona, Finance and Investment)

For some participants, things had clearly not improved by the second and third interviews, and several revealed that they had still not grasped fully what was expected of them in reading and writing at this level of study. For example:

English's still my biggest_challenge. When I put my thoughts into words, they change... (Zack, Education)

The teacher said the most important thing was that I didn't make comparisons between cases in China and those in the UK... But why do I have to make comparisons? (Tracy, Education)

In my subject, we're hardly asked to write something. All we're asked to do is to answer [statistical] questions. I don't think my writing improves. (Emily, Signal Processing and Communications).

However, despite initial difficulties, other students appeared to have developed effective coping strategies as well as a better understanding of what was required of them, especially with writing:

To do a good assignment, you should be very clear about your topic and how it's based on previous theories... [You should] explain the research rationale with why this research question's proposed, why this method's used and conducted and your considerations of ethical issues... You should explain the contribution of your research to this field and the gap that your research will fill in. (Cindy, Education)

You need to...list all existing arguments about this strategy and how they inform your application...[to] give accurate calculations situated in a specific context...[and] to bring critical ideas to this strategy. (*Nina, Finance and Investment*)

When asked about this improved understanding, Cindy described how by semester 2 she had taken responsibility for her own progress, had become a more autonomous learner, and had actively sought and made use of advice and feedback:

I went to talk with her [a lecturer]... I think it's better to talk with teachers... So I had a chat with another teacher... and I got the feedback to my assignments, but it's not enough. So I went to check my original copies... and found no more comments on the page margins... I think their feedback is useful. They thought my assignments were good, and then the next time I will keep writing in this way... It's up to you to do it or not. (*Cindy, Education*)

However, not all students were able to respond in this constructive way or appeared to be willing – or able – to assume agency and responsibility for the development of their skills in academic discourses, preferring instead the more familiar didactic teaching-learning approaches they had experienced in their undergraduate degrees in China, and attributing their difficulties to external factors:

...I still like to follow others' opinions... My ways of learning are still like what I did in China... I need more time but I have so many modules. (*Zack, Education*)

Teachers speak too fast and their dialects are too strong. Moreover, you find the score you get doesn't relate to how much you understand the teaching. That's why we usually get distracted from the class. (*Rita, Education*)

[In our group work] it's the English native speakers' responsibility to compose all the pieces of individual writings together as a coherent article. (*Fiona, Finance and Investment*)

From these accounts it is clear that successful negotiation of subject literacies was dependent not only on the students' ability and willingness to assume responsibility for their progress and to develop coping strategies, but was also inextricably linked to their experience of the other important transitions they were navigating throughout their Master's degrees.

Critical and analytical thinking

Analytical and critical thinking, as noted earlier, is widely acknowledged as both a distinguishing feature and an indispensable requirement of academic literacy practices at Master's level in UK and other Western universities. It can be seen as one particular form of the exercise of autonomy in learning (Pemberton and Nix, 2012), but it also 'creates a sense of ownership in relation to knowledge' (Gram et al., 2013, p.766). Indeed, across each of the three subject areas surveyed in the present study, critical and analytical thinking emerged as indispensable at Master's level. Some of the students both recognised this and could express clearly in their own terms how it was conceptualised and practised in their own particular Master's programme:

In the UK, you must have your ideas why this result comes out and why this step goes to the following step... Then you can figure out how and where you can improve your programmes and make contribution to the area.... I mean critical thoughts. We're a hard discipline. So critical thinking is to improve things according to well-established knowledge (*Mike, Signal Processing and Communications*)

Doing critical thinking doesn't mean you only summarise (others' arguments). You should check how they gave their arguments. And according to theirs, you give your own critical evaluations. Did they propose their arguments appropriately and properly? Is there any evidence? (*Roy, Finance and Investment*)

Nonetheless, many of the students found it a struggle to put into day-to-day practice what was expected of them, even when they were able to acknowledge the requirement to think critically. As one put it:

Although you're learning hard to do critical thinking expected by (UK) teachers, it's still challenging to do it appropriately and knit it together with what you've read. That's why a lot of my peers felt OK before the assignment submission but got bad scores. (*Sherry, Education*)

The students identified various hindrances that stood in the way of developing accomplishment in critical thinking. One was the inhibiting effect of an uncertain grasp of English:

I don't want to say something [in the class discussion] because I don't know what to say. It may be due to my ideas and my language. (*Mary, Finance and Investment*)

This teaching method is called brainstorming, which is supposed to generate critical thinking through interaction with peers. But I can't understand them, so I can't have my critical thinking and I'm unable to let others know my ideas. (*Cindy, Education*)

For some students, another complicating factor could be their relative unfamiliarity with a subject area:

I really don't understand what this teacher said in the class, because I don't have prior knowledge. (*Bruce, Signal Processing and Communications*)

Most significantly of all for the students, it would seem, was the lack of a prior grounding in what was a Western-derived concept in the course of their first degree studies. In their eyes, this had put them at a significant disadvantage compared to their more habituated British counterparts:

In China, I accepted everything told by teachers. I didn't realise I should spontaneously reflect and criticise what the teacher said. (*Charles, Signal Processing and Communications*)

The Chinese students are educated in the 'Chinese way' – the teacher-centered context...so they aren't good at giving critical perspectives. But the western students have been trained in this way. (*Fiona, Finance and Investment*)

As Ramanathan and Kaplan (1996) have observed, there is a wide cultural chasm to be bridged in such circumstances, for the capacity to engage in critical thinking 'is predicated on the assumption that the student is acculturated enough to see relationships between various cultural phenomena...to assess the credibility of different kinds of sources...and to weigh various kinds of evidence' (p. 27). Furthermore, as far as these particular students were concerned, it may also be valid to take into consideration the degree of respect accorded to established authorities within Confucianist modes of thought (and therefore a reluctance to separate out the known from the knower in advancing a personal analytical re-synthesis).

Finally, amongst those of the Chinese Master's students who appeared to have made the greatest strides in developing their capacity for critique and analysis, there was also a recognition that making progress did not occur spontaneously. It needed to be actively striven for by taking full advantage of the opportunities to practise and hone one's skills that lay within the Master's programmes concerned. In the case of *Finance and Investment*, for instance:

At the postgraduate level, teachers expect me to present critical awareness in the exams. That means I need to read. (*Dick*)
Learning overseas trains students...discussion and presentation train students to learn more actively... Presentations help students to think critically in English and use good logic. (*Mary*)

Interaction with teachers and peers

Interaction with peers and teachers, as a distinctive 'signature pedagogy' (Shulman, 2005) in western learning environments, provides opportunities for practice in communicating understandings and ideas. This is especially significant in professionally oriented Master's programmes because students are able to make conscious or unconscious connections between new socio-cultural discourses and their existing knowledge; but it is of even greater importance to Chinese students, because interacting with western peers as the dominant cultural group is a powerful means of acquiring socially-situated literacies. Achieving these purposes is dependent upon the actions of individuals as well as groups, i.e. on the extent to which a student's 'cultural script' (Welikala and Watkins, 2008) has evolved to understand how learning through interaction is actually practised in their own specific discipline, as well as on how they have been positioning themselves in relation to their western peers.

Almost every student in this study recognised the significant role of interaction in the western pedagogical culture and acknowledged that it was the learner's responsibility to strike up a conversation, for example:

Teaching-learning is an interactive process. It isn't only requiring teachers to ask questions. We also should propose questions actively. (*Lucy, Finance and Investment*)
...We thought it would be worthwhile to discuss how you might go about answering before doing [the individual assignments]... When you're doing a question, some of the problems raised make you think you may be

confused. Why couldn't you get the right result? Some cohort-mates can check your idea from other aspects, which may be helpful to solve the problem. In the class, teachers supervise. While discussing with peers, it also can inspire each other quickly. (*Charles, Signal Processing and Communications*)

Yet some students' cultural scripts had not advanced sufficiently far to enable them to engage in group discussions. For instance, while Rita – an *Education* student – pointed out that vocalising ideas could help her to argue in a logical way, like many Chinese students she viewed interaction with teachers rather than with peers as productive; seminars were 'aimless discussions' because 'teachers rarely offer conclusions'.

The students' prior learning experiences in China may help to explain why they did not thrive in this less familiar Western communicative environment. This was thrown into particular relief for some students following the two 'harder' subjects, where closed-book examinations were a common form of assessment:

In the UK, teachers like to communicate with you. They're quite active to arrange time to make interactions with students happen, so now we have a tutorial once a week. However in China, it was students' responsibility to make the time with the teachers, and we would only have a class before the exam to ask questions to teachers. (*Mike, Signal Processing and Communications*)

In the discussion, you'll see how Western students perceive this topic, how they interact with teachers, what perspectives and ways of thinking they take to do assignments... We didn't have (group discussions) in China. (*Roy, Finance and Investment*)

The students' difficulties in engaging in discussion may also be associated with limited language competence. For example, Sherry, an *Education* student who had gained some experience of western pedagogy in China in her main subject of English, still found it challenging to be brave enough to interact with teachers in the UK. In contrast to her Western peers who 'like[d] to interrupt teachers to ask questions actively', she was one of the Chinese students who 'preferred sitting there, listening and asking questions after the class'. That was not a viable option for her counterparts studying *Finance and Investment*, where developing effective communication skills was an explicit curriculum aim:

They [my group members] are all native English speakers and our group discussions were like debates. If you spoke English slowly, you would be interrupted... especially in our subject, everyone's ambitious. (*Nina, Finance and Investment*)

Some of the students had taken a course in English for Academic Purposes (EAP) prior to their Master's programmes, but they did not find that it had made a significant difference, even though using English, and living with native-English speakers, may have boosted their confidence.

Despite these limitations, a cultural stimulus to engaging in interaction with peers could be discerned:

In China...because you're too familiar with group members, it's alright if you're a

free rider. But here [in the UK], it's less possible [because] you're facing peers from different countries, who you aren't familiar with. You have to do things.
(Andrew, *Finance and Investment*)

This phenomenon can be interpreted by drawing on an insight from Tajfel (1984):

[W]hen social groups differ in status and power, strategies aiming to maintain a satisfactory social identity and to achieve positive distinctiveness from other relevant groups on certain relevant dimensions of comparison do undoubtedly continue to play an important role in collective behaviour. (p.699)

In other words, some students conceived of themselves in group discussions as representatives of the Chinese discourse group and were thus concerned not to be looked down upon by the dominant cultural group.

Concluding Comments

This study has examined the postgraduate learning journeys of three groups of Chinese students through the lens of Master's literacies. The findings would seem to bear out the value, in this context, of that interpretive approach and its four components of autonomy, interaction, critical thinking, and subject discourses. The findings also showed up important differences between the three subject areas in the forms which each of the four components took and in their relative significance. Written communication, for example, posed a substantial challenge in the discursive subject area of *Education*, but was not as salient in *Finance and Investment* or in *Signals Processing and Communications*, where numeracy skills were more to the fore.

There were similarly crucial differences between students in the degree of challenge which each component of Master's literacies might pose, and at what point in their studies they felt most challenged. Transition, it should be emphasised, was not a readily demarcated stage surmounted in the early months of Master's studies, but varied in its configurations from one student to another as well as over time, when programme expectations intensified or took a new turn. And while – even in the same Master's programme – some students made good progress by finding coping strategies early and practising them more effectively, others seemed to have become stuck or were even regressing. The evolution of each students' journey towards Master's literacies, it was found, could be helped or hindered by their self-confidence, their fluency in English, any prior experiences they might have had of Western-style pedagogies, and their attitudes towards making changes:

"Their acquisition of Master's literacies could be stuck if they viewed it as an external imposition, and if they saw the need to make changes as temporary and extrinsic rather than a lifelong internal change. Conversely, students progressed well if they interpreted this as a need to change habits of mind as well as social practices."

(Zhao, 2014, p. 285)

Nor did the students' journeys necessarily culminate in a wholehearted embrace of postgraduate learning as it was exemplified in this UK setting. For some, to comprehend and be able to practise Master's literacies well enough to succeed in their chosen subject area

was not necessarily to accept in full its value and legitimacy. Indeed, here is a welcome reminder that no particular cultural 'version' of Master's literacies should be presumed to be self-evidently superior. (Interestingly, Durkin (2008) has argued for pedagogical approaches to postgraduate classroom debate that aim for an intercultural 'middle way' between UK-style aggressive debate and more conciliatory forms of dialogue.)

To arrive at a more robust understanding of Master's literacies, it hardly needs saying, further empirical investigation is essential, and encompassing a much wider range of subject areas, institutional settings and culturally distinct systems of higher education. It would also be desirable to examine the salience of Master's literacies as a conceptual lens for research into students who, unlike the present sample, are native speakers and have chosen to 'stay on' in the same university and subject areas as their first degree.

There are also practical implications, even from this relatively small-scale study, for universities in the UK and elsewhere offering similarly intensive one-year Master's programmes to international students. What more could be done to help such students to become confident, autonomous learners, able to identify and adopt appropriate coping strategies when they encounter difficulties and challenges with their learning? There are, in our view, compelling arguments for more systematic efforts to foster students' evolving grasp of Master's literacies, providing these are grounded in the relevant disciplinary discourses and subject pedagogies. It would also be desirable to seek ways of breaking the lockstep of interaction, in which students' lack of confidence in their oral language competence inhibits them from engaging in the very kinds of interchanges – with peers and with teachers – which could help them make better progress. More time in exams for non-native speakers would also be beneficial. Lastly, and given the large numbers of first-degree holders who undertake postgraduate study overseas, universities in China might consider how students can be better prepared to cope with the demands of Master's-level learning, especially in Western universities.

References

- Bache, I & Hayton, R 2012, 'Inquiry-based learning and the international student', *Teaching in Higher Education*, vol. 17, no. 4, pp. 411-23.
- Biglan, A 1973, 'The characteristics of subject matter in different scientific areas', *Journal of Applied Psychology*, vol. 57, no. 3, pp. 195-203.
- Bowman, H 2005, '"It's a year and then that's me": Masters students' decision-making', *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, vol. 29, no.3, pp. 233-49.
- Brown, L & Holloway, I 2008, 'The adjustment journey of international postgraduate students at an English university: an ethnographic study', *Journal of Research in International Education* vol. 7, no.2, pp. 232-49.

- Charmaz, K 2014, *Constructing grounded theory: a practical guide through qualitative analysis*, 2nd edn, Sage, London.
- Clark, R & Gieve, SN 2006, 'On the discursive construction of "the Chinese learner"', *Language, Culture and Curriculum*, vol. 19, no. 1, pp. 54-73.
- Durkin, K 2008, 'The middle way: East Asian Master's students' perceptions of critical argumentation in U.K. universities', *Journal of Studies in International Education* vol. 12, no.1, pp. 38-55.
- Gram, M, Jæger, K, Liu, J, Qing, L & Wu, X 2013, 'Chinese students making sense of problem-based learning and Western teaching – pitfalls and coping strategies', *Teaching in Higher Education*, vol. 18, no. 7, pp. 761-72
- Grimshaw, T. (2007) 'Problematizing the construct of "the Chinese learner": insights from ethnographic research', *Educational Studies* vol. 33, no. 3, pp. 299-311.
- Higher Education Statistics Agency 2015, *Students in Higher Education, 2013/14*. Tables C & P. HESA, Cheltenham, viewed 21 February 2016, https://www.hesa.ac.uk/component/pubs/?task=show_year&pubId=1&versionId=25&yearId=312
- Hofstede, G 1986, 'Cultural differences in teaching and learning', *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, vol. 10, no. 3, pp. 301-20.
- Hofstede, G 1997, *Cultures and organization: software of the mind*, McGraw-Hill, New York.
- Hounsell, D & Anderson, C 2008, 'Ways of thinking and practicing in biology and history. Disciplinary aspects of teaching and learning environments', in C Kreber (ed.), *The university and its disciplines: teaching and learning within and beyond disciplinary boundaries*, Routledge, New York & London, pp. 71-83
- Kember, D 2000, 'Misconceptions about the learning approaches, motivation and study practices of Asian students', *Higher Education* vol. 40, no. 1, pp. 99-121.
- Knight, PT (ed.) 1997, *Masterclass: learning teaching and curriculum in taught Master's degrees*, Cassell, London.
- Kvale S & Brinkmann, S 2009, *InterViews: learning the craft of qualitative research interviewing*, 2nd edn, Sage, London.
- Lea, MR & Street, BV 2006, 'The "academic literacies" model: theory and applications', *Theory into Practice*, vol. 45, no. 4, pp. 368-77.
- Lillis, T & Scott, M 2007, 'Defining academic literacies research: issues of epistemology, ideology and strategy', *Journal of Applied Linguistics* vol. 4, no. 1, pp. 5-32.

- Marton, F, Dall’Alba, G & Kun, TL 1996, 'Memorising and understanding: the keys to the paradox?', in D Watkins & JB Biggs (eds), *The Chinese learner: cultural, psychological, and contextual influences*. Comparative Education Research Centre, University of Hong Kong/Australian Council for Educational Research, Melbourne, pp. 69-84.
- Marton, F & Säljö, R, 2005, 'Approaches to learning', in F Marton, D Hounsell & NJ Entwistle (eds), *The experience of learning: implications for teaching and studying in higher education*. 3rd (internet) edn, University of Edinburgh, pp.39-58, viewed 21 February 2016, http://www.docs.hss.ed.ac.uk/iad/Learning_teaching/Academic_teaching/Resources/Experience_of_learning/EoLChapter3.pdf
- McClure, JW 2007, 'International graduates' cross-cultural adjustment: experiences, coping strategies, and suggested programmatic responses', *Teaching in Higher Education* vol. 12, no. 2, pp. 199-217.
- McEwen, L, Duck, R, Haigh, M, Smith, S, Wolfenden, L & Kelly, K 2005, 'Evaluating the "postgraduateness" of vocational taught Masters environmental courses: student perspectives', *Planet*, no. 14, pp. 8-12.
- Pemberton, R & Nix, M 2012, 'Practices of critical thinking, criticality and learner autonomy', *Learning* vol. 19, no. 2, pp. 79-94.
- Quality Assurance Agency 2015, *Characteristics statement: Master’s degree*. (UK Quality Code for Higher Education). QAA, Gloucester, viewed 21 February 2016 <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/en/Publications/Documents/Masters-Degree-Characteristics-15.pdf>
- Roulston, K 2010, *Reflective interviewing: A guide to theory and practice*, Sage, London.
- Shulman, LS 2005, 'Signature pedagogies in the professions', *Daedalus* vol. 134, no. 3, pp. 52-59
- Street, B 2007, 'Academic literacies and the "new orders": implications for research and practice in student writing in higher education', *Learning & Teaching in the Social Sciences* vol. 1, no. 1, pp. 9-20.
- Tajfel, H 1984, 'Intergroup relations, social myths and social justice in social psychology', in H Tajfel (ed.), *The social dimension. Volume 2*. Cambridge UP, pp. 695-713.
- Tobbell, J, O’Donnell, V & Zammit, M 2010, 'Exploring transition to postgraduate study: shifting identities in interaction with communities, practice and participation', *British Educational Research Journal* vol. 36, no. 2, pp. 261-78.
- Welikala, T & Watkins, C 2008, *Improving intercultural learning experiences in higher education: responding to cultural scripts for learning*. Institute of Education, University of London.
- Zhao, W 2014, 'Learning journeys and Masters’ literacies: Chinese first-degree students’ transitions to postgraduate studies in the UK', PhD thesis, University of Edinburgh

Zimmerman, BJ 2002, 'Becoming a self-regulated learner: an overview', *Theory into Practice*. vol. 41, no. 2, pp. 64-70.